Interviewing Children

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Children as experts in their own lives

- Children have been regarded as 'the best sources of information about themselves' (Docherty and Sandelowski, 1999, p.177 cited in Cohen et al, 2017, p.528)

- The interview accords children agency and competency which is sometimes denied in their lives

- Children are seen as a respected resource, not a problem, and their knowledge is seen by all parties as essential for the research (Jansen, 2015 cited in Cohen et al 2017, p.528)

- Solberg (2014) suggests that adults indicate to children that they, the interviewer, are not like 'ordinary' adults (in the sense of exerting power over the children) but rather they (the adults) lack the knowledge that the children possess and that they (the adults) can learn from the children's experiences, opinions and ideas (p.244, cited in Cohen et al, 2017, p.529)

Children as interviewees

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Points to consider

- It is important for the interviewer to be able to enter their world and childhood culture and to see the situation through their eyes
- Children differ from adults in cognitive and linguistic development, attention and concentration span, ability to recall, life experiences, what they consider to be important, status and power (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p.116 as cited in Cohen et al, 2017, p.528)
- The interview is a non-naturally occurring social encounter, a series of speech acts.
- The task is to engage children in a safe context, not to interrogate them or pump them for information.

Ethical issues

- 'First, do no harm' – primum non nocere – is paramount (Jansen, 2015, cited in Cohen et al, 2017, p.528)

- An interview is likely to be an unfamiliar situation for many children

- Need to make the strange familiar

- There are several deliberate actions that the interviewer can take to do this.

Practical issues - 1

- Interview in a familiar location, e.g. a school classroom with complete privacy and no risk of interruption
- Have the interviewers seen around the school before the interviews
- Ensure a good fit between the culture of the interview and the culture and ethos of the school
- Ensure informed consent
- Guarantee anonymity, privacy, confidentiality and non-traceability (subject to safeguarding protocol)
- Put the children at their ease at the start of the interview

Practical issues - 2

- Make the interview serious yet very good natured, easy, enjoyable and positive

- Create a relaxed, friendly, and at times, humorous atmosphere

- Indicate how important the children are in the research

- Take care with clothing, to respect the children rather than to frighten or over-awe them

- If the lead interviewer is much older than the children, have a much younger research assistant who deliberately dresses down to be more akin to the children

Practical issues 3

- Use question-and-answer techniques that the children are well used in to in class, namely the children have expectations of the adults, and the adults deliberately try to fit those expectations to some extent

- Use the language, genre and register of the children wherever possible

- Take care with the question structure, sequence and wording, making them easy to understand, clear, concrete and specific, with one-word answers at first, moving to open-ended answers later in the interview

Practical issues 4

- Take great care with proxemics (the amount of space that people feel it necessary to set between themselves and others), and non-verbal communication, and scrupulously avoid intrusion into personal space

- Give positive feedback on, and thanks for, comments received

- Be acutely alert to hesitancies, non-verbal communication and silences, the emotional and social dimensions of the interview and respond appropriately

Putting children at ease

- It is important to establish trust with children

- Need to put children at ease quickly

- Help the child to feel confident

- Avoid over-reacting, e.g., if the child is distracted

- Putting children at ease extends to the timing of the interview

- Need to make the interview non-threatening and enjoyable

- Avoid making the children feel that they have to explain themselves

Language

- Interviewers need to use straightforward language and child's language
- Interviewers need to ask questions that are appropriate for the age of the child
- Ensure that older children know can understand abstract questions
- Questions need to be very clear, uncomplicated, concrete, specific and straightforward (Krahenbuhl and Blades, 2006 cited in Cohen et al, 2017, p.529)
- The researcher needs to remember that some children will choose to respond orally, whilst others may respond in non-verbal communication (Sohlberg, 2014, p.246 cited in Cohen et al, 2017, p.529)

Conduct of interviews

- Interviewers with children must guide the interviews in such a way as to 'invite rather than overrule the informants' (Solberg, 2014, p.234 cited in Cohen et al, 2017, p.529)

- Interviewers need to give children time to think

- Interviewers need to combine methods and activities in an interview, for example, drawing, playing, writing, speaking, playing a game, using pictures, doing an enjoyable task (Houssart and Evens, 2011), using newspapers, toys or photographs (Cohen et al, 2017, p.529)

Types of question

- Open-ended questions help to avoid a single-answer type of response

- Answers to open-ended questions are usually more accurate than answers to closed questions as they are respondent-driven and respondent-focused

- Open-ended questions can take greater account of children with limited linguistic or cognitive abilities

- Closed questions can lead to response bias with children providing answers without thinking (Wright and Powell, 2006, p.317 cited in Cohen et al, 2017, p.530)

Power, status and level of formality

- A power and status dynamic is heavily implicated in interviewing children – they have little in comparison to the adult

- It is important to ensure that children are given a voice and an interview setting in which they feel comfortable

- With younger children it can be useful to make the interview more like a game, e.g., by using props such as toys and pictures, to make it less unnatural and to make the interview as informal as possible

- For older children it may be more useful to formalise the interview so that children have a sense of how important the situation is, and they can respond to this positively

- Children will be sensitive to the gender of the interviewer, to many features of the interviewer – 'interviewer effects' Denscombe, 2014, p.191 cited in Cohen et al, 2017, p.531

Projection technique

- Instead of asking direct questions, the interviewer shows a picture or set of pictures, and then asks the child for their response to it/them

- Another option is the use of dolls or puppets, vignettes, drawings by the interviewees, photographs of a particular scene which the interviewees have to comment upon, e.g., what is happening, what should be done here? And the 'guess who' technique, namely which people might fit a particular description

Challenges in interviewing children - 1

Interviewer needs to work out how to:

- Overcome children being easily distracted
- Avoid the researcher being seen as an authority figure, e.g., a teacher, a parent or an adult in a powerful position
- Understand what children mean and what they say
- Gather a lot of information in a short time – children's attention span being limited
- Have children reveal what they really think and feel rather than what they think the researcher wants to hear
- Avoid the interview being seen by the child as a test

Challenges in interviewing children - 2

Interviewer needs to work out how to:

- Avoid the interview being seen by the child as a test

- Keep the interview relevant

- Overcome young children's unwillingness to contradict an adult or assert themselves, or, in the case of adolescents, deliberately being oppositional in their views

- Interview inarticulate, hesitant and nervous children

- Get the children's teacher away from the children

- Respond to the child who says something then immediately wishes s/he hadn't said it

Challenges in interviewing children - 3

Interviewer needs to work out how to:

- Elicit genuine responses from children rather than simply responses to the interview situation

- Get beyond the institutional, headteacher's or 'expected' response

- Avoid receiving a socially desirable response

- Ensure that the child is giving a true opinion

- Keep children to the point

- Pitch language at the appropriate level

Challenges of interviewing children - 4

Interviewer needs to work out how to:

- Overcome the children taking a question too literally, hence it is best to avoid metaphors, similes or analogies

- Enable the children to see a situation through other people's eyes

- Avoid the interview being an arduous bore

- Overcome children's poor memories

- Avoid children being too focused on particular features or situations

- Avoid the situation where the child will say 'yes' to anything addressed (an 'acquiescence bias'), for example, by avoiding 'yes/no' questions in favour of open-ended questions

Challenges of interviewing children - 5

Interviewer needs to work out how to:

- Overcome the situation of the child saying anything in order to please, or rather than feel they do not have 'the answer'

- Overcome the inclination of some children to say that they 'don't know' (for a variety of reasons, e.g., they are not interested, they genuinely don't know, they don't understand the question, they think that the interviewer might expect them not to know, they are unwilling to disclose what they do know, they are too shy to speak, they cannot explain themselves very well), or simply to shrug their shoulders and remain silent

- Avoid children telling lies

Final points

- The challenges are not exclusive to children; they also apply to interviewing adults
- It is important to ensure that distractions are kept to a minimum so conducting the interview in a room that the child knows well and feels comfortable in is important
- Use simple language which is to the point and is not ambiguous, e.g. avoid metaphors
- An interview is a social encounter, and children may be very sensitive to the social dynamics and social context of the interview and not only its cognitive element – 'children have good social radar' (Maguire, 2005, p.4 cited in Cohen et al, 2018, p.531)

References

- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2017). *Research Methods in Education* (8th ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315456539

Acknowledgments